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SUBJECT: UNDER-AGE RECRUITMENT IN CHAD

¶1. SUMMARY: International media attention to under-age recruitment in Chad, stimulated by reports from Human Rights Watch and UN, has brought an indignant rebuke from the government spokesman, but, at the working level, it appears to have resulted in enhanced cooperation from the Ministry of Defense with UNICEF. END SUMMARY.

¶2. The rise of instability and armed conflict in eastern Chad in the past four years, with a proliferation of Chadian and Darfurian rebel groups and militias, has brought a concomitant rise in the phenomenon of child soldiers along the porous border. For some time, UNICEF has suspected that the Chadian army also recruited under-age soldiers, without being able to quantify the problem. The December 2006 reconciliation between the government and the Chadian rebel group FUC (United Front for Change) put the army in the position of inheriting a major child-soldier problem. FUC, like other rebel groups in the eastern Chad/Darfur zone, actively recruited child soldiers; its forces have been ostensibly absorbed by the Chadian army; and its leader Mahamat Nour has become Chad's Minister of Defense.

¶3. In close succession in mid-July, Human Rights Watch and the UN issued reports on child soldiers in Chad, the latter in more measured tones than the former, with resultant international media attention. On July 17, the government issued a communique reacting to press accusations based on the Human Rights Watch report. The communique noted that most of the child soldiers in the Chadian army were former rebels, that demobilization and reinsertion were time-consuming and expensive, and that determining the age of soldiers was difficult. It expressed surprise that international organizations (read UNICEF) and civil-society organizations engaged in demobilizing child soldiers in Chad had remained silent rather than praising Chad's efforts to fulfill its commitments under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. (Chad has signed several commitments, including most recently, on May 9, an agreement with UNICEF on demobilization of child soldiers throughout the country.) Meanwhile, UNICEF/Chad has issued an emergency funding request for 2.7 million dollars to pay for demobilization and reintegration of thousands of child soldiers in the period August 2007 to December 2008.

¶4. On July 14-16, poloff traveled to Mongo, the principal city in the Guera region of central Chad, to meet with officials and view child soldiers. After the reconciliation

with FUC, the Chadian army had turned over the old caserne in Mongo to FUC, which now effectively controls the entire Guera. Of the approximately 2000 FUC soldiers in Mongo (out of some 9000 in the country), the Ministry of Defense identified 193 as under the age of 18, the first significant group of child soldiers in Chad designated for demobilization. When UNICEF arrived in the Guera to investigate, the number of children rose to 430. At the time of poloff's trip, UNICEF had already transferred 159 from Mongo in June and early July to reintegration centers run by Jesuit Relief Services and Christian Children's Fund in Abeche and Ndjamen. Poloff observed that the remaining 271, temporarily in the care of the Chadian Red Cross in a cramped facility, for the most part were unquestionably under 18, in some cases substantially so. The FUC commander claimed that all 430 were orphans who had been "camp followers" and never been used as soldiers.

¶5. In a meeting with Charge in Ndjamen July 12, the Governor of Guera, Amadou Ahidjou (a former leader in the rebel group MDJT), said that these children had been used as soldiers and did not have the mentality of children. They were interested in learning a trade but if treated "like children" (i.e., sent to school) had a tendency to run away. Many, he said, came from Darfur. He criticized UNICEF for calling for demobilization while being unprepared to carry out reintegration. (He noted as well that the FUC presence posed a continuing security challenge not only in Mongo but throughout eastern Chad. He said that he had had to defuse a near outbreak of fighting between the army and FUC in March.)

¶6. On July 12 and 25 poloff met Jean-Francois Basse, UNICEF protection officer in charge of child-trafficking issues in

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Chad. Basse said that the government of Chad had been cooperative in child-soldier discussions, except for a break-down in the dialogue in mid-July. It had signed the May 9 agreement; a coordinating committee had been established with wide representation from the government, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations; and the committee had conducted regular weekly meetings. The May 9 agreement stipulated that UNICEF was to have access to all military sites. So far the Minister of Defense had only given UNICEF access to Mongo. After the removal of the first 159 child-soldiers from Mongo, the next tranche of 100 had been scheduled to be transferred on July 14, but the Minister of Defense had then insisted that the child-soldiers' former commanders accompany the youngsters to the reintegration centers. UNICEF could not accept this condition, and the transfer of the remaining child soldiers in Mongo was temporarily at an impasse. At the July 17 regular meeting of the coordinating committee, the issue remained unresolved, and the Ministry of Defense representative, General Bashir Haggard (not from the FUC, but a Zaghawan), insisted that there were no child soldiers in the Chadian army, except for FUC.

¶7. However, on July 18 Minister of Defense Mahamat Nour changed his mind about requiring FUC commanders to travel and remain with the child soldiers being demobilized in Mongo, and another 100 were transferred to a center run by CARE in Ndjamen. A further 75 were transferred to Ndjamen (Christian Children's Fund) on July 23, and Basse expected that the final 25 would be out of Mongo by the end of July.

¶8. At the weekly coordinating committee meeting on July 24, General Bashir reversed himself on child soldiers in the army. He said that the Ministry of Defense would now conduct a survey of child soldiers in three areas, Goz Beida, Abeche, and Ndjamen, to include army elements guarding the presidential compound in Ndjamen, and he undertook to provide this survey as soon as possible to UNICEF. He expressed regret at the tonality of the government communique of July 17. He said that the communique had not been coordinated within the government (including with the

Ministry of Defense). He also expressed regret that the military (FUC) had shown up earlier in the week at the Red Cross holding center in Mongo, in contravention of the ministry's undertaking with UNICEF.

¶9. Basse said that General Bashir's admission of the existence of child soldiers in the Chadian army was a signal development, changing the previous position that child soldiers in the army were only a FUC problem. A survey of Goz Beida (where UNICEF experts had, in the autumn of 2006, identified 50 cases of recruitment of child soldiers by the army), Abeche, and Ndjamena did not represent the entire country but these three areas were a good place to start and adequate for the time being. An effective dialogue appeared to have been reestablished with the military command. It was to be expected that it would take some time for the army's central command adequately to sensitize local commanders in the field.

¶10. Basse said that UNICEF would be working hard to build capacity to receive demobilized child soldiers. It was necessary to proceed quickly but step by step. The three nongovernmental organizations now receiving children did not have the capacity to handle the anticipated thousands. Basse had communicated with UN headquarters to recommend that Save the Children and International Rescue Committee, both large organizations with substantial experience in eastern Chad and in demobilizing child soldiers globally, be invited to participate. As for pledges of financial support, France, which chairs the UN working group on child soldiers in Chad (but does not have a track record for ponying up on such issues), had made a pledge so far, and he expected Norway to come forward.

¶11. Basse said he agreed with the Governor of Mongo's characterization of these child soldiers. They were physically children but could not be treated as children, so they presented a "very tough" challenge for reintegration. Basse acknowledged the governor's frustration with the

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reintegration process. As challenging as monitoring recruitment was, he said, the much greater challenge was reintegration. Basse noted that most areas of UNICEF's concern, children's health for example, did not tend to entail potential confrontation with the government, but child soldiers were a highly sensitive issue. UNICEF had weathered this first potential crisis, apparently with a strengthened hand, as government of Chad appeared eager to avoid adverse international media attention.

¶12. Comment: Chad is an impoverished, largely illiterate country in whose vast rural expanse boys and girls are deemed to have grown up by the age of thirteen. It is also a country with a deeply-ingrained martial tradition. In addition to the widespread practice of children working as herders, agricultural laborers, and household help, there is therefore an equally deeply-ingrained tradition (especially in the north and east) of adolescent males being trained as fighters, although on nothing like the scale of, for example, Sierra Leone or Liberia. Given this tradition, it is encouraging that the Ministry of Defense appears so quickly to have distanced itself from the government spokesman's initial outrage.

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